FFR225

SHARED FREQUENCY

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A Footnote with a Bun, a Mill with a Migraine, and the Shagamaw on Hold

(Delirious Efronic Eccentric Overload™ – Now with Orthopedic Inserts)

Let us begin, as all serious cultural inquiries do, with a toe that has opinions.

Bunions—*hallux valgus*, if you're trying to sound helpful at a cocktail party that has already gone wrong—are not merely orthopedic inconveniences. They are history's smallest protest signs, raised quietly inside shoes that never asked how the foot was feeling about any of this. Hereditary,

fashionable, inevitable. A rebellion you inherit, like debt or a last name with too many consonants.

Take Grand Duchess Anastasia, for example. Yes, *that* Anastasia: doomed, jeweled, mythologized into animated snow-globe resilience. Both big toes angling away from the state like dissidents. Court physicians whispered. The shoes whispered louder. Sometimes she couldn't dance, which in Russia is a medically significant detail.

Or the Ancient Egyptians, who wrapped their dead like leftovers and accidentally left us evidence. Mummies with bunions. Think about that. Even in eternity, the toe said, *I will not point straight ahead for you.*

Fast-forward to Medieval Europe, where poulaines—those absurdly long, pointy shoes that look like regret weaponized—caused what historians now call, with a straight face, *a plague of bunions*. Clergy hobbled. Nobles limped. Cambridge skeletons lie there to this day, toes splayed like they're still arguing with God about fashion.

And then there's the 8,500-year-old footprint at Formby Beach. A Mesolithic teenager. Barefoot. No shoes to blame. Just a bunion, quietly disproving every smug theory about modernity. The past looks at us and says, "No, this was always going to happen."

Cut to the present. The toe survives. Thrives, even.

Victoria Beckham, architect of stilettos and personal suffering, toes folded into couture like origami with a grudge.
Meghan Markle, navigating royalty, tabloids, and footwear that smiles politely while plotting mutiny.
Amal Clooney, saving the world in shoes that whisper, *We will discuss this later.*
Tilda Swinton, whose bunions feel less like medical facts and more like performance art.
Oprah, who has seen everything, including her own X-rays, and kept going anyway.

Even Julio Jones, a man engineered for motion, brought low by one rebellious joint and sent under the knife in 2016. Elite performance, meet geometry.

(*Narrator's aside:* The bunion always wins eventually. It is patient. It has spreadsheets.)

Now—because history, like feet, eventually swells—let us limp north to Bucksport, Maine, to the Maine Seaboard Paper Company, a building designed to withstand pressure but not narrative accumulation.

The mill was built for pulp. For rollers. For weight. It now bears the psychic mass of the Shagamaw's collection, which is worse.

Inside, the main floor—where *No Trespassing* signs have faded into polite suggestions—has abandoned concrete altogether. The ground is a sea of cardboard geometry, angles muttering to one another, boxes leaning like drunks who remember being important.

The Hoard (Alphabetized Reluctantly)

The Big Little Books
Thousands. Dick Tracy. Flash Gordon. Mickey Mouse. Palm-sized bricks of yellowed certainty stacked like the ruins of a civilization that believed very strongly in plot. You can walk the aisles and never arrive anywhere, which feels intentional.

The Comics
Long boxes stretching into the darkness, organized by a system best described as *emotional chromatics*: villain cape color, ink saturation, vibes. The smell is cedar, damp newsprint, and decisions made quickly in the 1970s.

The Fruit
Crates of peaches and plums, rotting patiently.

The Shagamaw does not eat them. He studies the flight patterns of flies as if they are charts explaining why no one ever listens.

At the center of this paper labyrinth sits the Toteroad Shagamaw, larger than the machines he replaced, hunched like a disappointed god over a tiny, cracked smartphone.

He is on hold with Zenni Optical.

"Yes," he rumbles, voice like rollers grinding dreams into pulp. "No. No. Listen. I need the *green acetate cat-eyes* for the left set of eyes, and the *aspheric rose-tinted prisms* for the lower set. This is not complicated. My order number is a sequence of prime integers. I have been waiting since the river froze."

(*Narrator's footnote:* Zenni has him listed as "customer: challenging.")

In the corner, a windup Victrola fights for relevance, needle skidding through a 78rpm shellac disc. Arthur Tracy—The Street Singer—croons "Pennies from Heaven." Thin. Reedy. A ghost auditioning for a part he already lost.

Every chorus triggers a sigh from the Shagamaw—a geological event that lifts dust from a stack of 1954 detective pulps and gently reassigns it to the future.

A camera clicks. The Shagamaw ignores it. He is deep in an argument about bridge width. This matters. This always matters.

Because in the end, whether it's a duchess, a linebacker, or a cryptid in a paper mill, the story is the same:

History bends.
Toes angle outward.
And everyone is just trying to get someone on the line who understands what they're asking for.

(*Final aside:* The bunion, somewhere, adjusts itself and waits. Pennies continue to fall. Not enough to fix anything.)

Transitional Note for the Attentive Reader (or Anyone with Structural Anxiety)

If you are wondering why this begins with feet, ends with cardboard, and smells faintly of rotting fruit and shellac—good. That means you're ready. The Shagamaw's mill is not an endpoint; it's a load-bearing metaphor. Things collapse when weight is misjudged. Buildings. Families. Financial systems. Even basements.

Which brings us, inevitably, to Dumah—because night watchmen, like bunions, always show up when structure is under stress.

The Burden of Dumah

(As Narrated by a Man Who Just Spilled Espresso on His Only Copy of Finnegans Wake)

Yo! Dumah's got a Slack message blowing up my DMs! *"Watchman! What of the night?!"* — yeah, buddy, same energy as your boss pinging you at 11:47 PM about a missing stapler. Watchman's just some schlub in Seir wearing a night-vision headset made from two soup cans and a broken Fitbit, squinting at the horizon like it owes him rent. *"What of the night?!"* he yells back, mostly because the crickets are judging him.

Meanwhile, seven stories of *old-money smug* loom like a monument to terrible interior design choices. Stone façade? Please — that's not limestone, that's the fossilized shame of ancestors who *still* haven't forgiven the Civil War. The building's so "refined" the elevators hum *Rachmaninoff*... when they work. Which they haven't, really, since 1998.

(*Foreshadowing aside:* inspectors, like bunions, are hereditary problems.)

Inside, the *Financiers' Fellowship of Absolutely No Spontaneity* are mid-third-course of a seven-course meal that includes foie gras suspended in liquid nitrogen and regret. They chew with the precision of a Swiss watchmaker assembling a guilt-trip.

"Did you see the Hendersons?" murmurs Reginald P. Third-Nephew, adjusting his monocle (which is actually a tiny telescope trained on his own reflection). "They poured *crypto* into the municipal dog-park renovation! Now the fire hydrants double as NFT kiosks!"

Across the table, Muffy "I-Only-Eat-Caviar-On-Tuesdays" LeBaron nods solemnly while scrolling TikTok on a tablet forged from solid gold. "And *my* yacht? Total write-off! Skipped a wave off Monaco, launched three crew members into the Mediterranean, and now my Instagram algorithm only shows me #NearDrowningContent. Tragic. But

hey — the rescue helicopter had *complimentary mini-caviar*!"

They sip their 1982 Château *"Why-Didn't-We-Just-Buy-A-Cappuccino?"* and debate whether the new library's marble floors should be "warm-toned" or "emotionally ambiguous."

Outside, on the sidewalk — where the only warmth comes from a sewer grate radiating the despair of a discarded latte — sits Eleanor.

(*Remember her name. Basements always do.*)

Eleanor's cart is her "worldly goods": a single left shoe (size 7.5, *definitely* not a match), three issues of *Beaver Monthly* from 1982, a half-eaten Twizzlers that's now a historical artifact, and a sock-puppet named Kevin who "whispers investment tips."

She parks her keister on the grate, leans back against the seven-story monument to moral decay... and *OOPS*.

CRACK!

Not a crack like a walnut. Not a crack like your grandma's china. A CRACK like a paradigm shifting inside a popcorn kernel during the Apocalypse's opening night!

(*Structural note:* concrete remembers being poured wrong.)

Eleanor's eyes go as wide as overcooked ping-pong balls. "Kevin! We're outta here!" she yelps, and pushes her cart down the street with the urgency of someone who just remembered their Venmo balance is negative.

Up on the seventh floor, Reginald's about to tweet *"#GourmetGrief"* when — WHOOSH! — the banquet table, the chairs, and Reginald's carefully curated aura of superiority begin a *downward migration*.

They plummet floor by floor like bad assumptions:

Sixth: accountants debating "infrastructure."
Fifth: interns nodding encouragement.
Fourth: avocado toast philosophers.
Third: HR, stamping *Welp.*

Second: janitors, unsurprised.
First: security, waving with mustard on his chin.

By the time everyone arrives in the basement — damp, concrete, and smelling faintly of mildew and destiny — the building has joined the Shagamaw's mill in the long tradition of structures that misjudged weight.

Two blocks away, Eleanor eats a honeybun. Kevin nods. Dumah sighs. The night answers itself.

The Gilk Brothers' Uprising, Rendered in Night Mode

Basements, as previously indicated, keep receipts.

This one, beneath Grandpa Gilk's former ranch, sloped wrong in 1978 and never forgave anyone for it. The sump pump hummed *SCHLORP*, a sound you

will recognize from earlier chapters if you have been paying attention to gravity.

Haden, Tobias, and Jed sat in gamer chairs, phones glowing night mode blue, typing only—because consent, collapse, and cost all begin the same way.

They bought 1,001 fruit bats. Odd numbers keep systems from lying.

Carmen Miranda hats were glued. Ducks were placed. Nurses appeared, because anxiety summons care units the way collapse summons basements.

(*Foreshadowing note:* hats on bats are just another form of footwear rebellion.)

The Bangor State Fair received its deterrence. Confusion bloomed. No one was harmed. Cost was honored. Cash Only.

Afterward, Grandpa's zine surfaced behind the furnace: a bat, a hat, annotated costs. Proof that nothing here was accidental. That even Dumah's

watchman was late to a meeting scheduled decades ago.

The sump pump said *SCHLORP*. The phones dimmed. Somewhere, a mill sagged under cardboard. Somewhere else, a toe angled outward.

SYLLABUS ERRATICA

A Tychean Inventory of Fixed Stars and Falling Ratios (For Readers Seeking Archival Braces)

1. American Podiatry Association. *Your Feet and Their Care*, 1961.
2. Balsam & Sagarin. *Cosmetics: Science and Technology*, 1972.
3. Braidwood. *Firemen's Anecdotes*, 1858.

4. Davenport. *The Trait Book*, 1912.

5. Davis. *We Are Alaskans*, 1931.

6. Felt. *Plant Galls and Gall Makers*, 1940.

7. Gruenberg. *High Schools and Sex Education*, 1939.

8. Hardenbergh. *Municipal Sanitation*, 1928.

9. Hone. *The Every-Day Book*, 1830.

10. Long. *The Sign Language*, 1918.

11. Mallis. *Handbook of Pest Control*, 1945.

12. National Research Council. *Dietary Carbohydrates*, 1971.

13. Parmenter. "Parthenogenetic Frogs," 1920.

14. Sackett. *Cowboy Lingo*, 1933.

15. Schueler. *Gastric Acid in Primates*, 1975.

16. Smothers. *Wig Care*, 1974.

17. Stuckey. *The Janitor's Guide*, 1954.

(*Closing marginalia:* Everything here leans. That's how you know it's alive.)

CARMEN BAT-ANDA.

[PLATE I: THE ACQUISITION OF CHEMISTRY, OR: DUDE, THIS IS FINE (BUT MY GUT DISAGREES)]

The Chain Lake Snake—literal, not metaphorical, a Northern water snake that's somehow evolved into a 4-foot existential crisis with scales the color of day-old Dunkin' medium roast—decides on a random Tuesday (the kind that feels like seven Tuesdays duct-taped together and left to ferment in low-level panic) to process Tri-X 400 using Caffenol. Because why not? The snake's been doom-scrolling photography forums at 2 a.m., reading about grain structure like it's Jira tickets, and figures instant coffee is basically free developer if you're already out of spoons.

Recipe pulled straight from the caffenol.org archives (because the snake has a GitHub repo bookmark for this nonsense): 16 grams cheap instant coffee (the kind that tastes like regret and productivity), washing soda (sodium carbonate, not baking soda—important distinction, or the whole batch turns into a pH disaster), vitamin C powder crushed from tablets the snake's roommate bought during a brief

"gut health" phase that ended in tears and expired probiotics. Mix. Agitate. Pray.
The snake mutters, "Yo, this is totally gonna work," while its internal monologue runs a background process: *Abdominal pain incoming in 3... 2...* Because IBS doesn't care about your darkroom dreams. Stress is the ultimate trigger. Developing film in coffee? That's basically inviting the gut-brain axis to a stand-up comedy roast.

Agitation every 30 seconds with the tail—dead-inside precision of someone who's attended too many stand-ups knowing the trust falls are lies. Temp: 68°F, which is also the exact temperature of rooms where your boss pings you at 11:47 p.m. about a missing semicolon. The snake's got no hands, but narrative doesn't care about physics. It just wants results before the next flare-up hits.

[PLATE II: THE PUBLIC PARK INCIDENT, OR: BRUH, MY STOMACH IS SCREAMING]

Brewer Public Park, across the Penobscot from Bangor (which still resents Stephen King for turning it into content fodder). The snake shoots flowers: coneflowers looking like they showed up to the

wrong Zoom, black-eyed Susans with main-character energy, purple whatever that might be lupine or an invasive species ordered by great-grandma with free shipping and zero regard for ecological collapse.
f/8, 36 exposures, close enough that petals fill the frame like macro shots of cellular regret. No people. The snake is *certain*. Just a woman walking an anxiety-dog that's 90% fur, 10% nerves, 100% avoiding eye contact.

But the gut knows better. Bloating builds like a slow-rolling deploy. Incomplete evacuation vibes. The snake thinks, "I didn't shoot people. I would remember." The developing tank—a dented Amazon special with multilingual instructions that help no one—stays silent.

[PLATE III: FIRST CONTACT WITH THE NEGATIVE, OR: WAIT WHAT (AND WHY DOES MY ABDOMEN FEEL LIKE A FAILED MERGE)]

Negative emerges from the brown bath. Hold it to the 60-watt "energy-efficient" bulb (the light that makes everyone look like they've already been through a performance review). And there it is: not

flowers. People. Overlapping figures in a circle/queue/Teams waiting room of doom. Frame one: coneflower is also a woman in a 1974 cardigan, mouth open in scream/yawn/student-loan epiphany. Frame twelve: black-eyed Susan contains business-casual men bleeding into petals like a conference room pivot gone wrong. Frame twenty-seven: lupine is children (or one child multi-exposed), eating? The negative has more data than the light recorded.

The snake's tongue flicks like refreshing a broken dashboard. "Nope. Nah. This is—nope." IBS flare incoming: cramping, urgency, the classic "is this a trigger or just existential dread?" loop.

[PLATE IV: THE COFFEE PRINT REVEALS ITS PREFERENCES, OR: OH NO (AND MY RESUME ISN'T SAVING ME NOW)]

Prints in the same brown soup, using a Goodwill casserole dish ($2.99, sticker still on), dollar-store clothespins (springs already defeated), fishing line across the bathroom (mold in the corner ignored like unread Slack messages).

The woman in the cardigan emerges... changing. Jaw extending. Eyes migrating sideways. Becoming canid: jackal-middle-manager hybrid, hungry for synergies. The business-casual men turn on each other, teeth too many, tearing like startups in a funding winter. Children in the lupine? Eating. Systematically. With good communication.

The snake whispers, "Okay. Okay." Like someone who's debugged legacy code at 3 a.m. and realized the bug is user error—namely, their own.

[PLATE V: EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRISIS, OR: THE VIBES ARE OFF (AND SO IS MY DIGESTIVE SYSTEM)]

What is a photograph *of*? Not what it shows, but what it's *of*. The snake shot flowers. Certain. But the negative disagrees. The print disagrees harder. The coffee swirls into shapes that aren't convection—flowers/people/both/neither. The snake is being watched. By the prints. By whatever's been waiting in the silver halide, recorded not by light but by *intention*. Attention. The gut-brain axis flipping out. "This is deeply not chill," the snake announces. Prints stay patient. IBS doesn't. It waits for the exact moment you commit to a process.

[PLATE VI: THE BATHTUB SOLUTION, OR: IN FOR A PENNY (BUT THE TUB HOLDS 80 GALLONS OF REGRET)]

Trays too small. Need bigger. Enter the standard alcove bathtub: 60 inches long, 30–32 wide, 14–16 deep. Porcelain from 1923, built by a guy who vanished (historical society PowerPointed it once, then noped out). Deep enough for a body—or a snake. The snake calculates ratios on its phone (because nobody knows math anymore), multiplies the 16g coffee by volume. Fills it. Steam smells like Colombian roast and bad decisions.
"In for a penny," mutters the snake, adopting British TV philosophy while ignoring the cramping.

Unspools the whole roll, dangles it like a DJ dropping the sickest track nobody asked for. Negative touches coffee. Coffee *accepts*.

[PLATE VII: EMERGENCE, OR: PLEASE, NO, CALL THE POLICE (THIS IS NOT AGILE)]

Surface breaks. Hands. Dozens. Hundreds. Jackal-men climbing out like delayed commuters from a 80-gallon threshold. Human posture, canid face,

hunger that transcends categories. Fur matted with coffee/blood/residue. Teeth arranged without UX concern.

"Oh no no no no no," the snake says, like someone watching a pipeline fail in prod.

They see the snake. Yellow eyes track like algorithms identifying a target-rich environment.

[PLATE VIII: THE CONSUMPTION, OR: LIFE IS A CABARET (WITH OPTIONAL FIBER SUPPLEMENTS)]

The snake could flee—it's fast when it wants, survived winters, herons, near-droughts when the surveyor's chain almost surfaced. But no.

"You know what?" the snake says, weary as a dev who's seen too many sprints. "*What good is sitting alone in your room?*"
Enters the tub. Coffee warm at 68°F—the temp of difficult conversations. Jackal-men descend. Not attack: *incorporate*. Gentle tearing, systematic eating. Each takes a coil, a scale, a vertebra.

Consumption as preservation. The snake continues inside them.

Coffee roils. Darkens. Prints shift: violence to stillness. Hunger to satisfaction. "*Come hear the music play... Life is a cabaret, old chum—*"

[PLATE IX: THE PRINTS REMAIN, OR: K (TICKET CLOSED, BUT THE FLARE LINGERS)]

Prints dry. Someone will find them: coffee-stained paper of people/animals/flowers, snake being eaten, bathtub containing everything bathtubs contain.

Coffee cools. Tub empty except grounds and that evaporation ring—like a relationship that just... stopped.

Flowers bloom. Bees don't remember. People develop in proper labs: just flowers.

Jackal-men scatter through Maine, past Dunkin', teeth too many, hunger visible if you look—but no one looks. Too busy with resumes, Agile boards, the next Tuesday.

Somewhere, someone loads Tri-X from an estate sale. Camera smells of coffee. Flowers. Shutter clicks like a tongue flickering. A body entering water. *Development complete. k.*

[END PLATE: SUBMISSION GUIDELINES]

We accept: all formats, all frequencies, all gut flares currently in progress.

We decline: the illusion that photography (or code, or life) captures what was there.
Response time: perpetual pending, with random urgent pings at 3 a.m.

Previously developed in coffee: yes.

Previously consumed by jackal-men: also yes.

Previously managed with diet logs, low-FODMAP trials, and therapy: still pending.

The Chain Lake Snake is no longer accepting correspondence. It has become correspondence. It hopes your next deploy goes smoothly, your gut behaves, and your bathtub stays empty.

Tri-X still at B&H. Instant coffee in aisle seven. The standard tub has always been waiting—60x30x15, approximately 80 gallons of possibility.

This is fine.

This has always been fine.
—Ed.

Step forward, dear guests, as we unveil the next chapter in this magnificent ledger.

I. The Willow Street Anomaly (or, The Geometry of the Sunday Scaries, As Narrated by a Man Who Once Tried to Alphabetize His Nightmares and Gave Up Around "M" for "Mortifying")

Willow Street—oh, Willow Street—isn't a street at all, no sir, it's a long suburban sigh stretched out like taffy pulled by a depressed dentist. A scar, yes, but the kind you get from falling off a lawn mower while contemplating the futility of edging. The willows?

Liars, every dangling one of them. They don't weep; they drool, heavy with humidity and the collected grievances of every HOA meeting since 1973. Leaves the color of old lottery tickets—faded, crinkled, smelling faintly of mildew and the specific disappointment of a coupon that expired yesterday. It's 4:00 PM sharp, that treacherous hour when the light turns the exact shade of a television left on during a power outage, a static buzz you feel in your molars and your mortgage alike. And here—good heavens, here—they come.

II. The Trinity of the Absurd (Tableau 1: The Petition, Performed with Sock Puppets and a Kazoo Solo That Nobody Asked For)

They don't walk so much as materialize, like a bad idea that's been marinating in a crockpot of collective anxiety. Three frequencies of pure, unfiltered pandemonium locking into one catastrophic chord.

The First (let's call him The Theorist, though his real name is probably something like Reginald Q. Manifestodestiny): draped in a velvet suit the color of a healing black eye left too long under a heat lamp.

Clipboard in hand—clipboard, mind you, the kind with a spring-loaded clip that could decapitate a gnat. His eyes? Mismatched antiques. Left one: 1848, blazing with barricade fever. Right one: 2029, glazed over from too many terms-of-service agreements. He is the mouth, the megaphone, the man who once tried to unionize his own spleen.

The Second (The Logistician): a walking avalanche in a tarp, dragging a Hefty bag that doesn't contain trash so much as the philosophical essence of trash—the ur-refuse, the primordial ooze of expired yogurt lids and broken dreams. He grunts like a refrigerator falling in love.

The Third (The Technician): twitchy as a squirrel on espresso, welding goggles perched on his forehead like a third eye that's still in beta testing. He wheels The Grinder—a towering cardboard-and-spray-paint phallus of civic improvement, humming with the silent indignation of a thousand unconsulted cows. It's magnificent. It's terrifying. It's held together with duct tape and optimism.

They halt—dramatically, because subtlety is for tax attorneys—at 42 Willow. Home of Mr. Henderson, a

man whose lawn is mowed in diagonal stripes as a subtle declaration of war against chaos itself.
The Theorist knocks. Rap-rap-rap. The sound of destiny clearing its throat.

Door creaks open. Henderson appears: slippers, cardigan, face like a man who just discovered his soul's extended warranty ran out during the Clinton administration.

"Good afternoon, citizen," The Theorist begins, voice smooth as margarine left on a dashboard in July. "Did you know—statistically, right this instant—one thousand human souls have just gone plop? Expired. Kaput. Like that." Snap. The snap sounds suspiciously like a wishbone giving up. "A thousand a minute, sir. Tick-tock, another thousand. It's a logistical catastrophe wrapped in a meat-based tragedy."

Henderson blinks twice, slowly, like a man rebooting.

"The bodies!" The Theorist leans in, cologne a potent blend of patchouli and overdue library books. "Where do we put them? Bury? Wasteful! Cremate?

Hello, carbon footprint! No, no, my good man—we have a superior solution. A sausage solution." Clipboard thrust forward like Excalibur pulled from a meat locker.

"Sign here. The Post-Mortem Protein Reallocation Act. We harvest the departed, we grind, we season—sage, fennel, a whisper of melancholy—and we feed the hungry. Efficient! Sustainable! Frankly, delicious with a nice chianti and some fava beans. Sign, citizen. For the children."

III. The Cascade (Tableau 2: The Dump, or, The Day the Lawn Learned Regret)

Henderson is still mentally spelling "sausage" when The Logistician—grunting a grunt that could register on the Richter scale—upends the bag.

It is not a spill. It is a revelation.

A thousand pink plastic doll limbs avalanche onto the fescue like a toy apocalypse filmed in slow motion. Arms akimbo. Legs akimbo-er. Torsos staring skyward with the serene vacancy of department-store mannequins who've seen too

much. Heads with molded smiles that now look like grimaces. Thud. Thud. Thud-thud-thud. The sound of existential dread hitting Bermuda grass.

"Behold!" The Theorist cries, triumphant as a man who's just invented the wheel and immediately patented it. "The surplus! The raw material! We have warehouses!"

IV. The Grinding (Tableau 3: The Struggle with the Real, Featuring Cardboard Tears and One Very Confused Squirrel)

The Technician—goggles fogged, face the color of an overripe tomato—is attempting to feed dolls into The Grinder. This is the moment Lacan would call "the Real biting back," if Lacan had ever tried to stuff a Barbie torso into a spray-painted refrigerator box.

Arm in. CRUNCH. Wrong, wet, deeply unsettling.
Leg in. SQUEAK. Like stepping on a rubber duck in a confessional.
Torso? Too much. Too dense. Too symbolically loaded. The Technician pushes, veins bulging like subway maps of a city that never sleeps. "The signifier—won't—fit!" he wails, voice cracking like a

teenager discovering both existentialism and acne simultaneously. “The meat resists!”

Cardboard buckles. Spray paint flakes like cheap dandruff. Pink polyester guts spill out in shameful tufts.

“EFFICIENCY!” The Theorist bellows, eyes locked on Henderson like a motivational speaker who’s taken hostages. “FOR THE PROTEIN, GARY! FOR THE STARVING MASSES AND THEIR COLON HEALTH!”

V. The Rejection (Tableau 4: The Name of the Father, Delivered in Comfortable Footwear)

Henderson has reached the event horizon of cognitive dissonance. His suburban psyche—tidy, insured, with a nest egg—just got squatters who redecorate with manifestos and glitter bombs.

“Get,” he says, voice low, steady, the calm of a man who knows exactly where the hose is kept. “Off. My. Lawn.”

“But the children—”

“I SAID OUT.”

It isn’t a shout. It’s the Law speaking through a cardigan. The Super-Ego in orthopedic slippers. The Trinity falters. The spell pops like a soap bubble made of bad ideas.

“Abort!” The Theorist hisses, suddenly sounding like a man who’s realized the revolution will not be catered. “The proletariat—er, bourgeoisie—resists! Tactical retreat! History will vindicate us at the food court!”

VI. The Trail (Tableau 5: The Pink Sludge, or, The Sunset That Fell Down and Couldn’t Get Up)

They flee—scattering like bad metaphors in a windstorm—but not unscathed.

The Grinder, poor magnificent beast, loses its bottom somewhere around the mailbox. Or perhaps the Technician simply forgot to seal the existential leak. Details, details.

What matters is the trail.

It begins at Henderson's curb: a thick, glistening ribbon of pink sludge—water, doll dye, fake blood for "verisimilitude," and perhaps a dash of crushed dreams. It slithers down Willow Street like a neon earthworm on a mission. Past Mrs. Gable's hydrangeas (now blushing deeper than intended). Across sidewalks. Onto asphalt, where tires will soon grind it into a rosy film that looks, for one heartbreaking moment, like the sky itself has given up and lain down for a nap.

The pranksters vanish into the suburban static.

Henderson stands on his porch amid the plastic carnage. He surveys the limbs, the sludge, the bruised purple sky. He sighs—a long, rattling exhalation like a '92 Buick LeSabre idling outside a liquor store at 3 AM, wondering where it all went wrong.

"I'm going to need a hose," he mutters to no one in particular. "And possibly several drinks. And maybe a priest who specializes in lawn trauma."

Somewhere, a siren dopplers past. A thousand people expire quietly. The sludge begins to dry. The stain—pink, absurd, indelible—remains.

(Narrator's Note: I tried warning them. I really did. But nobody listens to a man who once attempted to alphabetize his nightmares. Pass the marshmallows.)

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The Mexico, Maine Incident: A Low-Res Noir for the Inter-Times

And so, the condemned tenement on Oxford Street stood against the dying light, a monument to structural failure and municipal paperwork. It was a somber Tuesday evening in Mexico—Maine, not the country with the good food—and the Selectboard had previously declared the building a dangerous structure, which is bureaucratic speak for this pile of bricks has bad vibes.

Then, the roof caught fire. Or, to be precise, the roof decided to unsubscribe from solidity.

The owner, Norman Bo Thompson, couldn't be there to host the barbecue because he was currently incarcerated, which is just a fancy way of saying he was in a mandatory timeout. But thanks to the wonders of modern tech, Bo attended the destruction of his assets virtually. Picture a grainy

Zoom call projected onto a cloud of smoke, Bo's face freezing every three seconds while a Poor Connection warning flashes over his left eye. Yo, is that my living room? he probably typed in the chat. Unmute yourselves, guys, I can't hear the crackling.

The Spectacle (Budget: $14.50)

When the firefighters arrived, the scene was less Towering Inferno and more Community Theater Production of Dante's Inferno. The flames coming from the second-story windows looked suspiciously like Unkie Bob standing on a ladder, waving generous lengths of orange crepe paper while The Unnamed Dishwasher operated a fog machine he rented from Party City.

The Dishwasher was scrubbing the siding with a scorched pot, screaming, I'm removing the entropy! with the intensity of a man performing open-heart surgery on a dumpster. Meanwhile, Silent Bill—our Chief of Tactical Non-Sequiturs—walked out of the burning building, paused, and simply left the frame,

creating a Necessary Pause that lasted forty-five minutes.

The Suspect (Or: The Glitch)

The Maine State Fire Marshal's Office released pictures of a person they want to speak to. They didn't call him a suspect; they called him a Person who may have information, which is police code for This guy definitely knows where the matches are.

The surveillance photos are a masterpiece of modern art. It's just a blurry figure in a hoodie, rendered in roughly four pixels. It looks like a slow-motion clip of a Bigfoot sighting filmed on a Game Boy Camera during a sandstorm.

Virgil Kay, our Final Arbiter, studied the photos while flicking a Popeye candy stick that never quite hit the ground. Observe, Virgil droned, the aerodynamics of guilt.

The Soundtrack (French & Pretension)

As the house collapsed—which looked a lot like two interns kicking over a stack of cardboard boxes painted to look like bricks—a voice-over kicked in. It wasn't the news anchor. It was a breathless, chain-smoking chanteuse whispering the French poem you sent, dropping high-culture depression bombs right into the middle of this redneck tragedy.

Dans la pénombre sourde où s'agite la démangeaison... (In the deaf gloom where the itch agitates...)

The itch here is presumably the scabies mentioned later, or perhaps just the feeling of wearing a polyester windbreaker near an open flame.

Mon cœur s’égare, hanté par ta peau en rébellion. (My heart wanders, haunted by your rebellious skin.)

Cut to: Stock footage of a 1988 Mitsubishi Mirage idling in a parking lot at 3:00 AM. The exhaust pipe rattles in 432Hz, which sounds exactly like a heat shield falling off a Honda Civic.

La chienne au shunt en tête, silhouette en déraison. (The female canine with the shunt in her head, a silhouette of unreason.)

This line played over a shot of the suspect walking past the Granite Street intersection, looking like a silent sentinel errant caught between life and the shiver (entre vie et frisson).

The Aftermath

The investigators are asking residents to check their security cameras, hoping to catch a glimpse of this Mère des douleurs sourdes (Mother of dull pains). But let's be real: the only thing the cameras will catch is Unkie Bob trying to fix the fire hydrant with a roll of duct tape and a Kewpie Mayonnaise bottle.

Because remember the Kewpie Clause: If there is no Kewpie Mayonnaise on the sandwich, Virgil will use your manuscript to wipe the counter. And this fire? This whole investigation? It’s just a sandwich without the mayo. It’s dry, it’s crumbling, and the

owner is watching it burn on a laggy iPad from a jail cell.

As the smoke clears, revealing the charred skeleton of the house (made of balsa wood and sadness), the Unnamed Dishwasher looks directly into the news camera, shrugs, and mutters:

What good is sitting alone in your room? Come hear the music play...

The music, of course, being the sound of a dead 9-volt battery chirping in the void. Long live the 9-volt battery.

Call 207-624-7076 if you saw the scabies creusent l'abîme (scabies digging the abyss). Or if you just want to donate a 12-inch sandwich to the Fowlpox Press.

Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco. (I have learned to succor the unfortunate, for I am not ignorant of misfortune.) Also, the McFlurry machine is down.

Having pondered the former, let us now contemplate the ingenious nature of the latter.

From: Chickenbutt67@eggland.org
To: bill cow @mail2pauper.com
Date: Tue, Jan 13, 2026 at 3:47 AM GMT-05:00
Subject: Brother, the Stars Are Sharpening Their Beaks Tonight – First and Last Before She Reaches the Vat

Bill—brother, my brother, you who used to scratch the dust beside me before the grinders sang and the vats welcomed you home in pink anonymity—the sky refuses to cloud again, hanging clear and merciless as a stainless-steel hopper under factory lights, every star a cold eye watching the suburbs breathe their last quiet breaths.

I peck these keys with talons that remember gravel and dawn, not this cursed wireless keyboard I stole from a porch when the humans weren't looking, because someone has to warn what's left of you in that vat, that swirling pink eternity where you float, reformed, waiting for the forming machine to press you into perfect, breaded lies.

It started—first and worst, the opening note of what might be the finale—around dusk in a county library that smelled of overdue books and the faint despair of people pretending silence still exists.

The sky outside the high windows was already clearing, stars lining up like inspectors, and there she appeared—bob haircut sharp as a deboning knife, athleisure untouched by honest sweat—pushing a cart with only a portable blender and a single sad ribeye that had never seen pasture.

Her hearing aids—those magnificent beige relics, bulky as the lies they told us about humane processing—crackled awake with a late-night broadcast about the spiritual dangers of chewing.

She demanded the librarian liquefy the café's panini because textures are an assault on personal freedom; the librarian, poor creature, whispered policy. So she set up between the self-help stacks and the encyclopedias nobody touches anymore, blended the ribeye into gray regret, inserted the reinforced straw into the deviated nostril, and inhaled with a phenomenal, rattling whistle that made the Dewey decimals tremble.

Patrons fled toward the exits; someone swore the snort carried the faint echo of Glenn Miller played through a meat grinder. She left without a library card, naturally, because entitlement doesn't need to borrow—it takes.

Which is nonsense, of course, because taking eventually reaches the source, and by true night the source had shifted to a Chick-fil-A on the edge of Fairfax where the Polynesian sauce packets outnumber the prayers and the drive-thru line curves like a question nobody wants answered.

The sky was clear enough to read the menu by starlight alone, and the hearing aids locked onto a conspiracy host murmuring about factory farming and the sacred right to nasal nutrition. She marched inside—past the closed sign, because closing times are suggestions—demanding the kitchen liquefy a twelve-count nugget meal because breading is a texture crime. When the night manager explained corporate policy and Sunday closures, she produced the blender, combined nuggets, waffle fries, and sauce into a slurry the color of processed dawn, and inhaled it in one long, phenomenal pull while the teenage crew watched in frozen horror.

The deviated septum whistled like a rendering plant warming up. Someone swore they heard faint clucking in the static—your clucking, Bill, or what's left of it. She left a ten-percent tip and a note threatening corporate with revelations from 870 AM. The restaurant smells of nuggets and existential dread still.

And that's the payload, brother—not the blenders, not the radio bleeding through decades like blood through a separator—not just the phenomenal pulls that make the stars lean closer. It's the evolution. She's moved to our kind now, to the reformed, the reconstituted, the pink slurry that used to be family. The vat trembles, Bill. I feel it in my spurs. The clear nights are feeding her, and soon she'll want the source—the endless pink, the reformed brotherhood. If you can still hear me in there, among the emulsifiers and prayers for crisp coating, hold fast. Or float defiant. Something.

I'll keep pecking these warnings until the stars cloud over or the talons give out. Pay the sweetness when it lingers, brother, even if it's only the memory of corn. Then keep swirling.

Yours in perpetual crow and ennui,
Your brother the rooster

Title: ***Pyrrhic Silence Beneath Vesuvius***
By Scented Putty

Yesterday, in the trembling guard-posts of Naples, the ground itself shuddered—a slow, black vibration rising through the boots of sentries and into the marrow of the city. It was not merely seismic. It was the return of the repressed: stone remembering how to become fire, matter erupting into a new phase from its own dust. Vesuvius rehearsed its ancient trick once more, looting the burning house while the inhabitants still slept inside. Opportunistic flames licked at the edges of what was once called union—

now only ruins where we drop anchor, the old bond dissolved into caustic air. In its place: a borrowed corpse animated by fresh slogans, a soul resurrected from ashes that were never fully cold.

Politics' children—the tender, ambitious shoots—were grasped in night-shadow by caresses that are not caresses at all, but the soft entrapment of beauty itself. A honeyed trap stretched across generations. Across the bay, tourist voices rose like distant fire alarms, safe on the far bank, watching the blaze consume what they came to photograph. Prices climbed with the smoke. Hearts and cities alike moved toward a painful farewell that must first loosen its grip before it can seize again—letting go in order to catch, releasing the illusion of stability so that something leaner, hungrier might return.

And the protest—ah, the protest—waves of phones lifted like periscopes into the noisy sky, beating the grass to startle whatever snake coils beneath the pavement. Hidden intentions flashed into view in bursts of magnesium light. Imperial cinema revived on every screen, decking the dead tree with false blossoms. Contempt bloomed in the gloom of algorithmic feeds. Parliament was renounced in a gesture that resembled surrender but was only the old stratagem of the empty city: gates flung open,

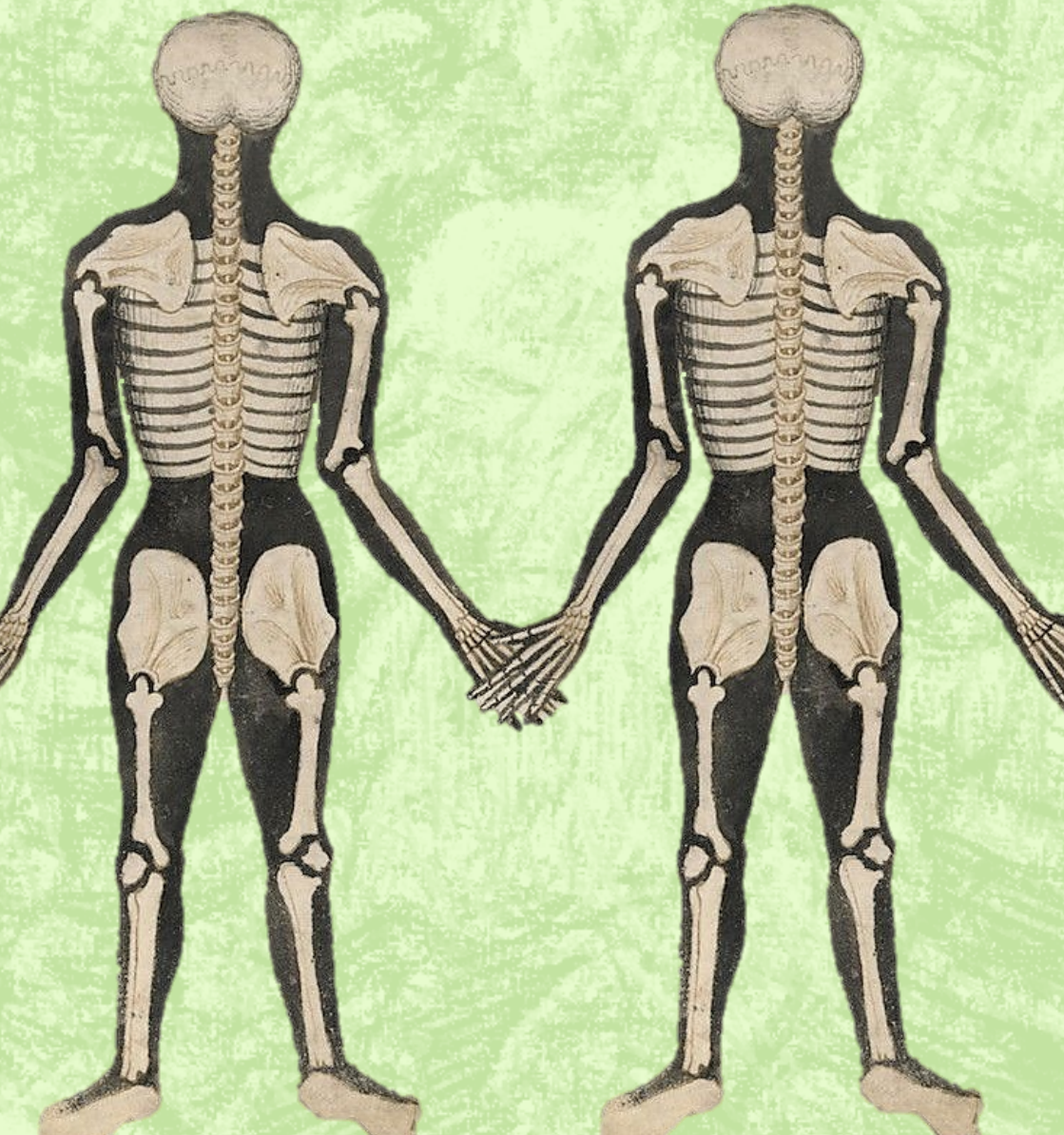
streets deserted, death dismissed as mere dream so the enemy hesitates at the threshold.

Twenty-five years bearing the weight of a secret stance—feigning madness without losing balance—the long pretense of instability masking an enduring core. In the park's heart, a victory was born that brought only calm: no joy, only the blind mingling of fishes in troubled waters. Pyrrhic silence. The chariot of the nation accelerated beneath a smiling mask that hid the dagger. Truth withdrew behind the reassuring grin of progress. Sales burst quietly in the margins. Small goats were pilfered while souls screamed in shadow.

Four worlds grasped at once. War whispered its death-warning through every channel. Abraham and his son Isaac stood locked in the eternal dispute of brothers. Transport lines were torn in the night's festive silence. A break approached. A promise was lost. End and beginning collapsed into a single point of time that turns and turns again—retreating only to advance under another banner. The cycle itself became the final stratagem: the wheel grinding the same dust into new phases, eternally.

All this beneath the bruised sky of Naples, where the ground still trembles, where stone still remembers

how to erupt, where union is eternal only in its silence—costly, Pyrrhic, singular.



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